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INTERWAR AMERICAN HISTORIES: LEFT, RIGHT, AND WRONG

Purchasing power: consumer organizing, gender, and the Seattle labor movement, 1919–1929. By Dana Frank. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xii + 349. ISBN 0-521-38367-6. £50.00. Paperback 0-521-46714-4. £16.95.

New Deals: business, labor, and politics in America, 1920–1935. By Colin Gordon. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xii + 329. ISBN 0-521-45122-1. £40.00. Paperback 0-521-45755-6. £15.95.

The long war: the intellectual People's Front and anti-Stalinism, 1930–1940. By Judy Kutulas. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Pp. xiv + 334. ISBN 0-8223-1526-2. $39.95 Paperback 0-8223-1524-6. £16.95.

The invisible empire in the West: toward a new historical appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. Ed. by Shawn Lay. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. Pp. 230. ISBN 0-252-01832-X. $32.50.

'We are all leaders': the alternative unionism of the early 1930s. Ed. by Staughton Lynd. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Pp. 343. ISBN 0-252-02243-2. $44.95 Paperback 0-252-06547-6. $17.95.

Stalin's famine and Roosevelt's recognition of Russia. By M. Wayne Morris. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994. Pp. ix + 224. ISBN 0-8191-9379-8. $34.50.

Building a democratic political order: reshaping American liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s. By David Plotke. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Pp. xi + 388. ISBN 0-521-42059-8. £40.00.

Forging new freedoms; nativism, education, and the constitution, 1917–1927. By William G. Ross. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. Pp. x + 277. ISBN 0-8032-3900-9. $35.

Liberals and communism: the 'red decade' revisited. By Frank A. Warren. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993; originally published 1966. Pp. xxiii + 276. ISBN 0-231-08444-7. $45.00. Paperback 0-231-08445-5. $19.00.

Frank, Lay et al., and Ross all deal with the aftermath of the United States's brief involvement in the First World War, and some of its enduring effects – political reaction with devastating results for the labour movement and progressive politics, brutalization of America's then-normal nativism, directed at members of the recent immigrant communities making up about a third of its population.

The setting for Frank's case study of workers' movements in the post-war era is Seattle. This regional city far from the industrial heartland was temporarily transformed by its participation in the wartime shipbuilding boom. It experienced an enormous influx of industrial workers, who became thoroughly unionized. But America's war was hardly begun before it was over; the war economy wound down even more rapidly than it had been created; the federal government stopped acting as shipbuilding's customer

and regulator; and the Seattle labour movement, which had gone up like a rocket, fell back like the stick. It signalled its impending collapse by mounting a brief, ineffectual, but none the less celebrated, 'general strike' in February 1919. Thereafter, it was downhill almost all the way, as the shipbuilding industry nationwide shrank back to its pre-war size, and the Seattle labour movement participated fully in the general collapse of unionists' collective strength and aspirations which the post-war years witnessed. The federal government's abandonment of organized labour, and indeed renewed opposition to it; the collapse of employment, in the metal-working industries in particular; the resumption of employers' and other local elites' unfettered hostility, all the more powerful because clothed in the rhetoric of anti-radical patriotism burnished by the war – all these familiar explanations played their part, in Seattle and elsewhere, and together constitute, one might have thought, a sufficient explanation for observed disappointments.[1]

Frank would have us think otherwise. She offers a non-traditional interpretation for that hoariest of old labour-historical chestnuts, the timidity and fragility of American working-class movements. This represents an attempt, of a kind becoming more common, to shift the focus of historical investigation from the world of production relations towards those of consumption, and therefore away from trade unions towards other working-class institutions, from male workers towards their womenfolk, and to an extent from materialist towards 'culturalist' explanations for working-class behaviour and passivity. In addition, she displays the modern American historian's usual concern with 'diversity' and 'inclusiveness'. In a city which was overwhelmingly white, its residents mostly native-born, British, Canadians, Scandinavians, or Germans, united in their fierce hostility towards those who were not, Frank is insistent on giving more than due attention to the members of the small local Asian and African-American minorities, and on explaining Seattle labour's weakness, in part, by its failure to include them within its strategies and concerns.

The result is an extremely interesting book which takes us into all kinds of fascinating byways while rarely losing sight of the central plot. Her great contribution is to remind readers of a period when a significant number of American workers still dreamed of alternatives to the capitalist provision of everyday goods and services, and sometimes tried to enact their dreams. The Rochdale model of co-operation, alongside the Wobblies' vague syndicalism, the Socialists' equally vague 'co-operative commonwealth', and the Bolsheviks' clear, violent path to social transformation, appealed to key activists within the Seattle labour movement and, for a time, to a sizeable popular constituency. Workers could maximize their buying power during a time of inflation and shortages, increase their collective ability to resist business pressures, and peacefully nurture the germ of a new order within the shell of the old; individual self-interest and collective class interests could be brought into alignment.

In theory, at least. In practice, consumers' and producers' co-ops were poorly resourced, badly led, and weakly supported. The depression of 1920–1922 disposed of most of them. Thereafter, a shrinking Seattle labour movement, confined to local-market industries – particularly construction, transportation, and services – turned to

[1] Joseph A. McCartin's *Labor's great war: the struggle for industrial democracy and the origins of modern American labor relations, 1912–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997), is the best as well as the most recent study of the subject; David Brody, *Labor in crisis: the steel strike of 1919* (New York, 1965), and Colin Davis, *Power at odds: the national railroad shopmen's strike* (Urbana and Chicago, 1997), are excellent accounts of the two great nationwide conflicts bracketing the post-war reaction.

other, less ambitious consumer-oriented strategies – boycotts of anti-union employers, and promotion of pro-union employers to working-class customers – to bolster its position. Neither approach was especially effective, partly, argues Frank, because the surviving American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions – cautious, conservative, increasingly run by their officials on 'businesslike' lines, accepting little input from their (largely male) members, still less from the latter's wives – were unsuited to organizing campaigns dependent on willing mass participation.

Frank's argument is at its most strained when she is forced to speculate about the motives of some of her unorganized and inarticulate, or at least scarcely recorded, historical actors. It is more dependable when dealing with those she finds least attractive – the conservative union leadership. She explains very well their withdrawal from tolerance of oppositional politics into a series of cosy bargains with local employers as a condition of their organizations' survival and even modest growth in their traditional niches. Her work is the first for some time to choose the AFL in the 1920s as its subject, to take our understanding of the forces for change within it from the national to the local level, and to explain developments in terms of the movement's evolving structure and composition as well as its leaders' ideology. The institutional core of the book is substantial and persuasive; the rest, while always interesting, almost seems beside the point, so over-determined is the outcome by the ordinary processes of political economy.

The book is quite well written, and represents a genuine contribution to knowledge. But her conclusion (p. 249) that 'Once we begin the process of incorporating gender, race, and consumption into the history of working-class organizations, it seems difficult to imagine a story without them' is made rather than proved. Undeniably, she has added to the conventional tale, but it would have stood quite well without the support. The associated claims that 'When we integrate gender and race we can see the ways in which the white and the male portions of the working class undermined their own cause' and 'imagine "class" in a manner that includes all working people and all the work they perform and imagine a working-class social movement built by addressing the interests of the entire working class' also read like gestures of solidarity towards an academic peer-group. In the hands of some of her less judicious sisters, strong forms of these arguments come close to making divisions of gender within the working classes more significant than other divisions of labour among them, and to painting such unions as survived the normal painful defeats at the hands of their employers as the enemies of the (reified, idealized, singular) working class rather than as the flawed and feeble representatives of the more fortunately placed among them.[2] Frank does not let her convictions spoil her history in this fashion – readers can spot, and skip, the editorializing, excision of which leaves a solid analytical narrative.

Shawn Lay and her fellow-contributors deal with an altogether more significant social movement in 1920s America than the vestiges of labour and radicalism – the second Ku Klux Klan, which was for a time more numerous, and arguably much more mainstream. The Klan was recreated in 1915 as an unfortunate consequence of the success of revisionist scholars, novelists, and, finally, the great film-maker D. W. Griffith, in selling a generation of white Americans a version of the history of the first,

[2] For an extreme example of this tendency, see Elizabeth Faue, *Community of suffering and struggle: women, men, and the labor movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1991), which many friendly reviewers seemed to find surprisingly persuasive. Ava Baron, ed. *Work engendered: toward a new history of American labor* (Ithaca, 1991), is generally more sophisticated.

Reconstruction era, Klan which legitimized and glamorized its anti-black violence. The second Klan far outdistanced the first, partly because of its organizers' astute promotional skills, but also because they latched onto recruits' desires for fellowship, excitement, and *power* against a host of imagined domestic enemies in the troubled aftermath of war. It spread far beyond the South; it became a largely urban phenomenon; its leaders took the common hatreds of white American Protestant citizens – towards African-Americans, Catholics, Jews, radicals, indeed aliens of every stripe – and turned them into the foundations of a movement with an appeal to millions of bigots in bedsheets.

The Klan has not lacked historians. Lay and her associates represent a self-conscious 'third wave' of KKK studies, different from its predecessors in their insistence on the Klan's *normality*. Rather than representing the underside of American history – a censorious, chauvinistic lower middle class turned *really* nasty – their Klan is an ordinary social movement whose members possess as much right as any other past historical actors to have their prejudices dealt with sympathetically.[3] The third wave's exercise in revision is justified as 'align[ing] Klan studies with the dominant trend in United States social history, that of compassionately and nonjudgmentally assessing the lives and activities of ordinary citizens' (p. 12). Rather than being dismissed with any cosmopolitan version of E. P. Thompson's celebrated 'enormous condescension of history', Klansmen (and, in two important recent monographs, women) are to be understood as 'a kind of interest group for the average white Protestant who believed that his values should be dominant in American society' (p. 34). So that's OK, then. Diversity, inclusiveness, and empathetic history can even make room for millions of what many of their more urbane contemporaries dismissed as hooded morons, whose multitude of hatreds can be minimized by scholars writing with the safety of three generations of hindsight as mostly rhetoric, or pooh-poohed as 'so-called intolerance' (p. 218).

A part of the revisionism results from historians' decisions to focus on the Klan outside of the South, so that the troubling reality of its continuing tradition of violence can be blurred by avoiding the communities where that was most prevalent. Other third wave monographs have dealt with the industrial North; all the contributors to this volume deal with small towns and cities in the West, a region which contained relatively few blacks, Jews, or immigrant Catholics, only 7 per cent of KKK members, and whose representativeness is therefore open to question. Leonard Moore writes, as if to minimize rather than explain them, that 'ethnic hostilities played a part in the Klan only in those communities … where non-white Protestants [sic] could be found in significant numbers' (p. 31). Surprise, surprise: if they were not there, you could hardly attack them, except rhetorically. Robert Goldberg argues that Denver, Colorado, Klansmen's violent and threatening behaviour, while 'reprehensible and to be condemned', must also be considered 'as tactics in a struggle for power' (p. 48). So that's OK too. But the sceptical reader is free to ask: power for what ends?

[3] Michael Kazin, 'The grass-roots right: new histories of U.S. conservatism in the twentieth century', *American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), pp. 136–55 at pp. 140–5, reviews two major monographs, Leonard J. Moore's *Citizen klansmen: the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (Chapel Hill, 1991) and Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: racism and gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1991), and discusses the 'third wave' in general. Nancy K. MacLean, *Behind the mask of chivalry: the making of the second Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1994), partners Blee in 'gendering' the Klan, but, with its Southern focus, is understandably much more critical than other recent works.

The third element in the revisionist method, apart from an amoral relativism and an apologetic tendency, is the application of social science technique. Klansmen's (and women's) normality can be demonstrated, rather than simply asserted, by the tedious but sometimes revealing processes of collective biography, which appear to show that there was little in the way of demographic detail to distinguish your average Klansman from his Protestant neighbours. They were middle-aged, middle-class, as Americans use the term, drawn from a wide spectrum of north-west European ethnic groups and Protestant (not particularly fundamentalist) denominations. The broad appeal of the KKK was established even by 'second wave' historians in the 1960s; the third wave subtracts their continuing revulsion, and adds copious detail.

The final stage of legitimizing the Klan is to answer the above 'power for what ends?' question in the cosiest way possible. These small-town knights appear to have been driven most of all by a desire for moral policing which was not very different, even in method – a combination of majoritarian politics and vigilante threats and violence – from that favoured by less questionable organizations also representing America's white Protestant majority. The Klan agenda commonly included demands for strict enforcement of laws against prostitution and the liquor trade, attacks on corrupt or inactive local police and politicians (the latter parish-pumpers generally described by solemn, Klan-apologetic historians as 'elites', which automatically puts them in the wrong), and a variety of pressures against non-Protestants, non-whites, and non-citizens.

Klan historians are undoubtedly correct in arguing that these were mainstream issues in a decade of Prohibition, when nativism succeeded in closing America's hitherto open door to European migrants, and making life much harder for the millions already settled. But, as Michael Kazin has argued, Klan historians have been almost too successful in their normalizing task. The more ordinary and representative they make it seem, the harder it is for them to explain why, even at the time, it was so controversial, met with so much opposition from other Protestants demographically scarcely distinguishable from its supporters, was so vulnerable and transitory. Klan support seems to have been a mile wide but an inch deep; the reputation for secrecy and violence simultaneously drew in members and denied the organization and possibility of legitimacy; Jewish and Catholic conspiracies against the Protestant republic did not, of course, emerge to validate Klan rhetoric and consolidate its grass-roots base; more respectable and effective fraternal and nativist organizations coexisted and competed with it; and its leaders seem to have included an unusually high proportion of self-seeking opportunists and, to put it mildly, public relations disasters – at least as corrupt in office as the 'elites' they displaced.[4]

In the end, what is wrong with the contributions in Lay's collection, and with modern 'Klan studies' in general, apart from the inability of their collective-biographical techniques to explain why a minority of otherwise representative middle-class Protestants gave their support to this organization while most did not, and their weak explanations for Klan failure, is the matter of *tone*. They are so successful at representing the Klan as just another fraternal, nativistic, superpatriotic, populistic, grass-roots organization, that one almost forgets that Masons, Shriners, Eagles, Elks, Odd Fellows, and American Legionnaires *were not* in the habit of setting up blazing crosses, organizing 'poison squads' to boycott Catholic and Jewish businesses, or parading runaway nuns

[4] Kazin, 'The grass-roots right', pp. 142, 145.

telling their terrible tales of papist plots. These community histories are uniformly flat, boring, and value-free, which is perhaps their authors' intention; but that hardly recommends them to the reader.

After the above, it is with some relief that one turns to Ross's very plain, even worthily dull, but completely honest and untendentious work at the borderland of legal and religious history. His is an account of the origins in wartime and post-war nativism of a battle in which local 'elites', Masons, and Klansmen could all join together – a campaign to restrict or deny the freedom of minority ethnic and religious communities to preserve their language and their culture by maintaining their own separate, private school systems or even, where they were sufficiently numerous, influencing local school boards to the same effect. Midwestern state politics had long pitted Catholics and Lutherans – the groups most committed to separate parochial schooling and the maintenance of foreign-language instruction – against nativist advocates of universal, state-controlled, English-language, and nominally secular education. The war gave a new twist to this old campaign, and singled out German Lutherans for special attention. Despite the latter's attempts to demonstrate their American patriotism, their continuing attachment to the language of the Kaiser made them vulnerable, particularly in the Middle West and Plains states, where they were the most numerous and visible ethnic minority. Vigilante action and state laws or proclamations drove speaking in German out of public places and private telephone conversations, schools, libraries, and even churches, Iowa's governor asserting in June 1918 that 'there is no use in anyone wasting his time praying in other languages than English. God is listening only to the English tongue' (p. 45), the (ironically compulsory) 'language of liberty' and the only one in which, a Congregationalist minister had earlier stated, one could 'think American thoughts' (p. 25).

Ross details these proscriptive campaigns, and the accommodating, assimilationist response of most Lutherans – a conservative and generally quietist group. But the pressure did not end when the war did, and Lutherans were unwilling to make the ultimate sacrifice that 'Americanizers' demanded as the majority of states passed laws demanding English-medium education in public and private schools alike.[5] As war hysteria receded, Lutherans were able to lobby for compromises protecting German-language *religious* instruction in their parochial schools; but then they were caught up again by renewed, chiefly anti-Catholic, nativism, which resulted in a second wave of state initiatives supported by a broad spectrum of Protestants determined to extirpate separate religious school systems altogether.

Ross provides an excellent explanation for this unhappy time. The heart of his book is about the churches' response. When accommodation and compromise failed, the Lutherans turned to bold and astute political campaigning, often in partnership with Catholics, and sometimes with the support of Jews and African-Americans; when penal laws were enacted and enforced, the alternative strategy of an appeal for judicial intervention beckoned. But in state after state, supreme courts found in favour of the acts, and the only recourse left was the US Supreme Court.

On the face of it, the chances of success were slim: the Court's record of defending civil liberties was poor, its available precedents for defending such freedoms against state regulation inadequate. Nevertheless, the litigants pressed their cases, using a variety of

[5] Ross explains, incidentally, why multi-ethnic Americans became about as monolingual as the British: 'the proportion of high school students studying German [hitherto the most popular foreign language] fell from 25 per cent in 1915 to 1 per cent in 1922' (p. 65).

arguments ranging from the novel proposition that the states *were* bound by the federal Bill of Rights to the apparently more promising contention, given the Court's deep conservatism, that the disputed laws were taking away churches' property rights in their schools and German-language or private-school teachers' rights to pursue a legitimate vocation, and also violating parents' rights to control their children's education.

Surprisingly, the litigants won – both the specifically anti-German-language cases in 1923, and the broader issue of the right to maintain parochial and voluntary schools, albeit subject to state regulation, in 1925. At the height of the KKK's influence, one of the most conservative benches of Supreme Court justices in history struck an unexpected series of blows for liberty. In 1927 they were even prepared to build on their new precedents to defend a far smaller and more vulnerable minority, Hawaii's Japanese, up against local racist pressure.

What is the significance of Ross's model study? In part, he supplies what is missing from so much KKK scholarship, an understanding of how and why militant nativism, far from being considered normal, ordinary, and unproblematic at the time, fissured even the anglo-Protestant community. It also helped provoke the formation of inter-ethnic oppositional coalitions in defence of basic civil rights, of a kind which would later flourish within the urban Democratic party. The KKK, and nativism in general, did not just decline; they were challenged from within and outwith Protestant respectability; in crucial respects, even in the 1920s, and particularly on the battleground of ideas, they were defeated.

The school cases also started a process which gave embattled minority groups a new and promising defensive strategy. For the Supreme Court did indeed begin to grant other personal liberties the same kind of 'substantive due process' protection it had previously reserved for property rights, and it would very shortly commence incorporating the Bill of Rights into state law. Ross traces a clear line of descent for the civil rights jurisprudence which has done so much to shape modern American public policy and discourse, all the way from the school cases to the pro-contraception and abortion decisions of the 1960s and 70s. Ironically, these helped provoke a new backlash from the godly right – a group in which denominations which were the targets of earlier persecution sit alongside their erstwhile persecutors. Ross's fine book gives readers a credible and quite original insight into the roots of this unexpected present in an almost-forgotten past.

II

The second trio of books deals with the problem of communism in America's depression decade. Morris's slim but not cheap volume is the least interesting, neither impressive as argument nor competent as prose. He adds little to the literatures on the Ukrainian famine, American visitors to the USSR and their regrettable tendency to miss (or fail to report) bad news, or indeed Franklin Roosevelt's decision to recognize the USSR in 1933. He laments that 'very little was heard about' the famine, though it 'should have been a major news story' (p. 81). Similarly, despite the fact that the State Department was quite well informed, reports rarely circulated any further than mid-level officials, who took no action. This was largely because of a principled opposition to interference in the affairs of foreign countries – which Morris criticizes from a politically naive contemporary perspective, rather than attempting to understand or explain. He berates them for failing to publish this information as a counter to pro-Soviet reporting in the

American press, but is sharp enough to understand that this might have compromised the administration's plans for improved Soviet-American relations. Morris's major contribution is bringing this internal documentation to readers' attention, though even here he is less than wholly original. When he turns to presidential policy making, he repeats well-known criticisms of Roosevelt's working methods and motivations. Answers to questions about what the president knew or thought about conditions within the USSR, and their relevance to his government's strategy towards it, are largely speculative (e.g. p. 138) or misleading ('chose to ignore', p. 163). The briefest summary is that the president neither knew nor cared very much, but Morris thinks he should have. Really, the book rests on a false premise: that the policy of recognition in 1933 should have been affected by the rhetoric of the modern diplomacy of human rights, rather than by its practice. This has always been sufficiently elastic to permit the United States to continue to extend recognition and even support to a wide variety of bastard regimes, in line with realpolitik principles – because they are there and/or because they are convenient. This is poor stuff; its closing accusation of a 'conspiracy of silence' (p. 167) is no more persuasive than the rest of the work.

After Morris's sophomoric efforts, we return to works of quality – Warren's thirty-year-old classic, justly republished, with a useful new introduction reviewing the last generation's historiography, and Kutulas's intelligent, but comparatively inelegant and schematic, journey over some of the same ground. These are both studies of politically engaged intellectuals spread across the spectrum from the centre to the far left, and of the impact on their ideas and behaviour of the domestic and international crises of the 1930s. Both are concerned with that generation's diverse reactions to the 'Soviet experiment' and the Communist party of the USA.

The words 'liberal' and 'liberalism', or indeed 'intellectual', have slippery meanings. Both authors use the latter in much the same way – in Warren's definition, 'one who deals primarily in ideas and is free from the restrictions of public office' (p. 4) – but their typologies of the former are confusingly incompatible. Warren's and Kutulas's anti-communist liberals are much the same people, but his 'independent radicals', 'Russian sympathizers', and 'fellow travelers' overlap with some of her anti-communists, older liberals, and 'Progressives'. At the same time, her spectrum is much broader than his, including party intellectuals at one extreme and, at the other, elements of the non-communist left which, by the end of the decade, were moving beyond anti-Stalinism into anti-communism, making common cause with liberal anti-communists and disillusioned 'Russian sympathizers', and well on the way towards their eventual destination, the post-war right.

Warren's book is a nice reminder of a lost world of American historical writing, a fine product of the profession at or near its post-war peak in terms of sheer intellectual quality. The book is a joy to read, good-tempered and confident in its own values and well-grounded generalizations. It is clearly dated – not least in its unreflective use of (male) gendered language as if it were inclusive; but it still seems reliable, dissecting American liberalism and explaining changing patterns of attitudes towards the 'Soviet experiment' and Popular Front. It offers infinitely more than Morris to any reader who wishes to understand the pattern of (mis)perceptions of the USSR, and rather more than Kutulas towards an interpretation of liberal world-views. Warren describes very well the distorting, American-made lenses through which his characters examined the USSR. In doing so, he also accounts for the dominant interwar liberal commitment to statism and planning, and relative indifference towards civil liberties and a politics of

morality, in a way which is fully consistent with that offered by the most recent and perceptive commentator on the same phenomena, Gary Gerstle.[6]

Warren and Kutulas cover much the same territory: many liberals' desire for unity among 'progressives' even before the Community party ended its bizarre Third Period and inaugurated the Popular Front; attitudes towards the USSR, and in particular towards some of its more anti-social behaviour (forced collectivization, genocidal famine as an instrument of policy, political dictatorship, routine denial of civil liberties, trials, purges, and the Nazi-Soviet pact and Finnish War of 1939–40); and the Spanish Civil War. Kutulas explains the last very well as, not simply the cause which gave the Popular Front its principal *raison d'être*, but almost the only glue holding the Front together by 1938 as doubts about the Soviet Union itself, and the acceptability of continuing co-operation with its domestic cheerleaders in the CPUSA, became ever stronger.

Differences between them are partly matters of technique. Warren's is an example of an older kind of intellectual history which focuses on what prominent figures wrote, particularly in *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, American liberalism's house magazines. He is very good at teasing out meaning and discerning fine shades of difference. Kutulas's research base is much broader, including collections of personal papers and the archives of key liberal and Popular Front pressure groups. She is therefore more concerned with the inner politics of the diverse liberal and 'progressive' communities than simply with their verbal expressions, and aims to produce 'a social history of intellectuals and their institutions' (p. 16). This leads her towards an interesting but half-baked, though oft-repeated, explanation of some of the divisions she articulates, and developments she charts: that these were reflective of generational change and conflict within the ranks of the overwhelmingly New York-based intellectuals she and Warren have both studied. Rather than being the result of interaction between liberals' inadequate ideas and a Soviet Union and Communist party of the USA (CPUSA) which were hard and unreliable allies to cope with, the growth of anti-Stalinism and anti-communism in particular is explained as a byproduct of the personal, often careerist resentment of younger (largely Jewish) intellectuals against an older (largely WASP) liberal establishment. This is semi-plausible, but Kutulas does not help her case by presenting the results of the collective biographical work underpinning her argument in a single crude table (p. 24) with no sources or discussion of methodology, so that one has to take her sampling techniques and categorizations on trust. Presumably this part of her scholarly apparatus was one of the sacrifices she was forced to make between thesis and publication. As it stands, the argument rests on little more than assertion and anecdote, and impresses one as rather reductive; it seems intended to diminish the bad guys (and gals) in her story, the disputatious, rightward-bound anti-Stalinists, and to spare her the necessity of examining their ideas as carefully as she does those of the historical actors she finds more appealing. It is fairly plain that the latter are her 'progressives', and that, despite everything she says against the CPUSA, she is uncomfortable with the new scholarship which tends to reinstate, indeed strengthen, 1950s Cold War conclusions about the party's slavish dependency on the USSR, and therefore about the fatal weakness of Popular Frontism as ideology and practice.[7]

[6] Gary Gerstle, 'The protean character of American liberalism', *American Historical Review*, 99 (1993), pp. 1043–73.

[7] Michael Kazin, 'The agony and romance of the American left', *American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), pp. 1488–512, reviews the historiography of socialism and communism. Harvey Klehr et

A final interesting comparison between these books is that both appeared at moments of revision: Warren's as McCarthyism waned, and a sympathetic examination of the diversity of motives and behaviour among American left-liberals, who were *not* all dismissible simply as Stalin's 'innocent dupes' (p. 221), became possible; Kutulas's as the opening of Soviet archives made a generation of leftist scholarship arguing for the CPUSA's relative autonomy and status as a legitimate part of the left-liberal past less tenable. Kutulas seems to have accommodated herself to these new tendencies intellectually rather than emotionally, as her language occasionally shows: joining the CP took 'gumption' (p. 236); the Rosenbergs were 'two ordinary people sucked into a nightmarish world of conspiracy charges' (p. 229). But, despite the flaws, hers is a valuable contribution towards our understanding of intellectual politics in the Depression generation.

How much all those scribblers ever really mattered is another question – Warren's and Kutulas's characters *thought* that they had moved from the margins of American society and politics between the 1920 and the 1930s, that they had some purchase on the present and a workable vision of the future. It turns out that they had not, much, and they did not; but this probably will not stop more intellectual historians from adding themselves retrospectively to left-liberal magazines' subscription lists, sixty-plus years on.[8]

III

With the last trio of books we remain in the 1930s, and we leave intellectual history behind, but unfortunately we do not altogether escape the company of political tendentiousness, something from which, it is clear from the works sampled already, neither the left, the right, nor even the soggy middle of the US historical profession are immune.[9] It almost seems that a necessary qualification for writing some of this stuff must be the ability to believe several implausible things before breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, *and* supper.

In some ways, 'engaged' history is admirable: it results from a conviction that the past is 'relevant' and can be made to matter to the present. But the American past is also dangerously convenient – there is lots of it, it is very various, so we can find there what we like. Too often the consequences of this approach lead to a caricatured version of that past, without the ability to convince any but the already persuaded. This might be acceptable if bad history could be made to serve any conceivably good public political purpose. But when its most likely result is simply to mislead and confuse another generation of graduate students, such work is scarcely excusable.

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al., *The Soviet world of American communism* (New Haven, 1998), is the most recent addition from Moscow archives to the embarrassments of the Old Left.

[8] Alan Brinkley's 'The problem of American conservatism' and Leo P. Ribuffo's rejoinder 'Why is there so much conservatism in the United States and why do so few historians know anything about it?', *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994), pp. 409–29 and 438–49, represent a long-overdue acceptance by some US historians that the profession's preoccupation with a left-liberal account of American political development has rather missed the point.

[9] Nor, of course, are their critics. Peter Novick, *That noble dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (New York, 1988), esp. Section IV, provides useful background on recent intellectual and political currents among American historians, and explains why they produce some of the sorts of work here reviewed.

Staughton Lynd's collection *We are all leaders* is a strange hybrid. Lynd himself has pursued a long and distinguished career on what is left of the American left, as a historian and latterly a community activist, public-interest lawyer, and educational worker for a local union. What he and his collaborators have produced can be viewed on at least two levels: (i) as a series of minor but interesting contributions to the history of American workers' movements in the 1930s, a journey around the margins consisting of a map of roads less travelled or since abandoned, often because they turned out to be dead ends; (ii) as a collection of parables – most obviously Stan Weir's rosy-tinted reminiscences of life as a labour activist in the waterfront and maritime unions of the 1940s. These are intended to instruct and inspire contemporary critics of America's cautious, conservative, overcentralized, bureaucratic, and essentially impotent unions, and sympathizers with rank-and-file workers' insurgent movements within and beyond them. At a time when the American labour movement is weaker, in the private sector, than at any time since the 1920s, Lynd and his collaborators find a message of hope, of missed but not unrecoverable opportunities, of the possibilities of renewal, in those aspects of the 1930s and 1940s they have chosen to study. This is precisely the kind of advocacy history in search of a usable past for which excuses can be made, if necessary. But one has to wonder how useful a dense 343-page book, with lots of footnotes but no pictures, retailing even in paperback (unless heavily discounted) at the price of a decent dinner in an American family restaurant, can hope to be in reaching an audience beyond the seminar.

The book consists of eight substantive chapters sandwiched between a programmatic essay by Lynd and Weir's homiletic memoir. Three are reprinted from the authors' recent monographs or venerable articles, with the other five newly published in this collection. Half of the authors are university-affiliated; the others, whose work is equally as good, have a variety of activist-type jobs. They all seem to agree pretty much with one another, so it is fair to discuss them together. They deal with: a briefly successful communist-led movement among African-American, largely female, nutpickers in St Louis, Missouri, in 1933–4; an old Wobbly-led independent union of meat processors (including spam makers) and other workers in small towns and cities in Minnesota in 1933–7; the Southern cotton textile workers' strike of 1934, represented as a casualty of union–government co-operation in service to employers' objectives; the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, c. 1934–9, done down this time (an interesting twist, reminding one of the disagreements between the Old Left and the New) by some of the early Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO)'s communist activists; local movements for an independent labour party in 1934–6, ended by the consummation of the supposedly barren marriage between the official labour movement and the Democratic party; community-based labour organization in Minneapolis and in a small Ohio city; and north-east Pennsylvania anthracite 'bootleggers' – unemployed miners digging and selling coal on their own account, from land they did not own.

The collection has already been subjected to friendly but expert criticism with which it is hard to disagree.[10] Most of it focused, not on the authors' few factual errors or most arguable interpretations of clouded events, but on their overall perspective. This is that in the 1930s – particularly in the years before the founding of the CIO and passage of the National Labor Relations, or Wagner, Act in 1935 – a form of labour activism flourished in the United States which was qualitatively different from, and better than,

[10] '"We are all leaders": a symposium on a collection of essays dealing with alternative unionism in the early 1930s', *Labor History*, 38 (1998), pp. 165–201.

what followed. It was 'democratic, deeply rooted in mutual aid among workers in different crafts and work sites, and politically independent. The key to the value system of alternative unionism was its egalitarianism' (p. 3). It is claimed to have been at least as effective in recruiting as the later CIO, and more effective in representing its members' shopfloor interests. A lineage for these activist episodes is traced back to a 'culture of struggle' at least a generation earlier. Cases similar to that which, for example, Dana Frank examined, become the bases of a *better* past – including the kind of labour movement she too imagined as an alternative to the actual disappointments of history. The CIO, which, as Lynd recalls from his boyhood, 'was considered the most progressive social force in the United States' (p. 1), is represented as the enemy and extinguisher of these movements, committed as it was to working in collaboration with the New Deal state to win institutional stability and recognition by managements. Substitution of representative for direct democracy, of centralized for local control, of organization by plant and industry for organization by community, and of orderly, contract-bound employment relations for spontaneity and strikes, have often been considered as the terms of a kind of Faustian bargain between labour's 'New Men of Power' and deeply entrenched corporate, legal, and political establishments. Lynd et al. go beyond this to suggest that a type of labour movement they find almost worse than none at all was inherent in the CIO leaders' 'project' rather than the result of a series of compromises with stern necessity.[11]

None of these accusations is new; some were current at the time, others filled the pages of *Radical America* and like magazines in the 1960s and 1970s, and have formed the basic arguments of a school of academic monographs ever since. None of them is entirely without foundation. The issue between adherents of this viewpoint and critics from what is sometimes called, perjoratively, a 'labor realist' perspective, is this: can one build a credible alternative account of the past (and therefore of a, foreclosed, better possible present and future) by counterposing a series of sometimes sentimentalized case-studies of short-term movements ending in extinction, often among workers in marginal industries and small communities, to the larger story of what actually happened in the later 1930s to bring enduring organization to millions of workers in America's industrial heartland? The question is usually asked rhetorically; the expected answer is No. Lynd et al. respond that the cases they have studied *were not* marginal and that, even if they were, to dismiss them on that basis is elitist and therefore wrong – 'enormous condescension' again. More plausibly, they point out that what worked for American labour, after a fashion, in the 1930s through to the 1960s, no longer does, so that the future means of representation of the shrinking working class's interests is once again up for grabs. Reinterpretation of what went wrong in the 1930s and 1940s is supposed to reopen old, arguably better, options.

No meeting of minds is likely in this debate. More than disagreements as to fact, the purposes of historical research, and requirements for the production of generalizable interpretations, are at issue here. Ideology per se is not the basic problem. Most of the arguments are among academics who are all, in American terms, quite left of centre, and very unusual in the degree of interest and sympathy they hold for the American labour movement, such as it is. The line of division between Lynd et al. and their critics seems to be a matter of temperament. Many historians who have continued to read,

[11] For an authoritative treatment of the CIO, see Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, 1995), and discussion in 'Robert Zieger's history of the CIO: a symposium', *Labor History*, 37 (1996), pp. 157–88.

research, and keep their eyes on the troubled present since the old 'New Left's days of hope, have been chastened by the experience. They have become impressed by the extent to which, even in the 1930s, many American workers remained cool to the benefits of collective action, or only joined unions after the latter demonstrated their ability to deliver concrete, immediate gains. They are more persuaded about the importance barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, occupation, skill-level, and locality posed to the construction of any significant workers' movement than they are by moments of transcendence. They have come to appreciate the benefits, even the necessity, of leadership and bureaucracy, if social movements of those with few power resources are to be at all durable. They have become conscious of the usually hostile political, legal, and ideological American climate, and in particular of the bitter and effective war most American employers have waged against most unions, most of the time. The Faustian bargain, if that is what it was, does not look so bad, under the circumstances. A battle rumbles on between social-democratic pessimism informed by things as they are and have been, and radical optimism reinforced by selective nostalgia. No end is in sight.[12]

Political scientist Colin Gordon's book was announced by its publisher as 'the first major reinterpretation of the New Deal in almost thirty years', presumably comparing it with Ellis W. Hawley's magisterial and still reliable work.[13] How true was this? Before answering, I must declare an interest: I participated, with others, in a lively and exhaustive online review symposium focused on *New Deals*, through the H-BUSINESS discussion list, shortly after it was published. Exchanges with the author became heated and personal. There was no meeting of minds here either. Gordon's originality had evidently provoked a reaction among his peers, but probably not the one he would have wanted, and not from the peers he might have chosen. Reviews in scholarly journals were more mixed. The most critical assessments of 'a book everyone can hate' came from middle-aged or older male historians of US business and labour relations, like myself. No one faulted the breadth and depth of Gordon's research in the right primary and secondary sources. The problem was that the result of his extensive investigations was a version of the past scarcely recognizable, and largely incredible, to others who had trodden the same path.[14]

Three years later, after the heat of battle, is the book any better for another cool reading? No. The argument remains unacceptable. It depends neither on *suppressio veri* nor *suggestio falsi*, but on a nuanced rhetorical technique. Gordon qualifies much that he has to say, in a suitably scholarly fashion, but the overall effect of his decisions as to selection, presentation, emphasis, and interpretation is to point towards conclusions which are untenable. The heart of the book presents a case for continuity rather than discontinuity in policy making between the Republican 1920s and the Rooseveltian New Deal of 1933–5, which is made in two ways: specifically, that the key measures extending the federal government's power in the areas of economic regulation (the 1933

[12] See 'Nelson Lichtenstein's Walter Reuther: a symposium', *Labor History*, 37 (1996), pp. 332–64 – Lichtenstein makes the best case for lost opportunities in *The most dangerous man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the fate of American labor* (New York, 1995).

[13] Ellis W. Hawley, *The New Deal and the problem of monopoly* (Princeton, 1966).

[14] Daniel Nelson in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 50 (1997), pp. 537–8 at p. 537. For other opinions, see *American Historical Review*, 101 (1996), p. 584; *Business History*, 37 (1995), pp. 127–8; *Business History Review*, 69 (1995), pp. 435–7*; *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), pp. 633–4*; *International Review of Social History*, 50 (1997), p. 537; *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995), pp. 1261–2; *Journal of Economic History*, 55 (1995), pp. 725–6; *Labor History*, 36 (1995), pp. 481–3. Asterisked reviews are the most favourable.

National Industrial Recovery Act), industrial relations (the Wagner Act), and social insurance and public welfare (the 1935 Social Security Act), had deep roots in the self-regulatory initiatives undertaken by parts of the business community in the 1920s; generally and fundamentally, that business interests continued to dominate the policy-making process in these areas in the 1930s, appearances, unhelpful evidence, and received interpretations to the contrary.

To take the second point first, Gordon clearly sits at the end of a materialist and/or marxisant tradition in US historiography which was quite influential in the 1960s and 1970s and still lingers on. One of its objects was to explain, or explain away, apparent deviations from the central thesis that business runs the show – particularly in the 'Progressive Era' and New Deal, when it sometimes seemed not to – by arguing that, at a higher or deeper level, business was *still* running the show even when most contemporaries – including most businesspeople – thought it was not. A favoured explanation among the old 'New Left' was that American politics, superficially democratic and pluralistic, was in fact elitist and manipulative. This was not in the realistic sense that, though most can speak, some voices speak louder than others, but because of the belief that behind policies which were thought, even by most businesspeople, to be anti-business, one could find small coteries of *really important* (sophisticated, far-sighted) businesspeople and their political or intellectual associates, pulling the strings.

This 'corporate liberal' interpretation was attractive to lovers of conspiracy theses, but proved difficult to verify empirically. Gordon is too sharp not to distance himself from such a discredited position, but echoes of it linger on in his work, alongside more sophisticated structuralist accounts of divisions of interest within the business community, and of its means of determining public policy. Thus, for example, if a few wholly unrepresentative businesspeople could be dredged up to serve as friendly witnesses before a congressional committee making a case for a proposal the business community overwhelmingly rejected, Gordon will cite their views. The technique of argumentation depends on implicit quantification: their actual tiny numbers sheltering behind the indefinite language of 'many' and 'most', a stage army of a handful or fewer businesspeople favouring, or prepared to accept, the Wagner Act or (parts of the) Social Security system, can be marshalled and selectively quoted to prove the case. Where even this approach will not wash, as in the case of the Wagner Act, Gordon bolsters it with a second argument, that the failure of business to oppose such measures effectively, or its subsequent coming to terms with aspects of them, can be read backwards to transmute murderous hostility into paternity.

So much for the general method. The detailed accounts of the weaknesses of the US economy in the 1920s, of initiatives in the areas of 'welfare capitalism' by a minority of larger and/or notably liberal employers, of business's capacity for self-organization, and of experiments in 'regulatory unionism' (joint union–employer attempts to control product market instability), are deeply flawed, inviting an 'Up to a point, Lord Copper' response. But they are the foundations for the argument of essential continuity between that decade's unsuccessful private-sector policy making and the political departures of the 1930s. In the latter sections of the book, the reader's hackles rise further, and – often an acid test – when Gordon is writing about that which one knows, in detail, from the archival inside, amazed laughter is the only possible reaction. The worst section of the book, which represents a contribution to knowledge in a strictly negative sense, deals with the Wagner Act; that on the National Industrial Recovery

Act is less unreliable, but other, fuller and less loaded, recent accounts are to be preferred;[15] while the problems with the section on the Social Security Act are mostly matters of emphasis. To mix the metaphor, how many grains of sand and straws in the wind does it take to construct the foundations for a house of cards?

Finally, leaving the best till last, we come to Plotke. He shares the same publisher and discipline as Gordon, once found himself in the same small corner of the political and intellectual universe, and deals with the same period and many of the same issues. That is as far as the similarity goes. Evidently, having had one unsuccessful try at producing 'the first major reinterpretation of the New Deal in almost thirty years', CUP determined to make another attempt two years later. This time, they succeeded. Plotke's is not an easy book to read – he writes well and clearly, but without Gordon's occasional sparkle; there are no deliberate or inadvertent jokes, and enjoyment has to be derived instead from the spectacle of Plotke lambasting Error in devastating footnotes. As Plotke seems to have read everything and to disagree with most of it, there are plenty of these. The approach is relentlessly and persuasively analytical, but unrelievedly dry. There are few stories, and not many individuals. Plotke's is a book about systems, not about chaps.

His central argument is plain and convincing: the New Deal was a political event and achievement, to be explained by giving primacy to political actors and discourses. Attempts (like Gordon's) to account for it by some variant of an economically determinist model have failed; attempts by other political scientists to explain it as just another stage in state building, or a product of the electoral process, or a reflection of the hegemony of liberal beliefs in the United States, are at best partly successful, such overarching theories having difficulty coping with a period of rapid, deliberate, self-consciously reformist political change.

Plotke is interested in how a new regime with a distinctive outlook, programme, and support-base of interest groups and electoral constituencies, was constructed in the crisis years of the early 1930s, and lasted in essentials through the 1960s. He calls this a 'Democratic Political Order', despite his cogent argument that the Democratic party itself was one of the weakest elements in the structure. This is probably to distinguish his account from the more pessimistic conclusions of the contributors to Fraser and Gerstle's *Rise and fall of the New Deal order*, who have pre-empted what might otherwise have been a better title.[16] But he also does so because he argues that the regime was indeed democratic in content, character, and outcome, as well as by party name – an outgrowth of 'progressive liberalism' in the American political tradition.

The passage of the Wagner Act and the ensuing growth of the CIO are central to Plotke's argument, as they were to Lynd et al. and Gordon; the difference is that he gets things right about this 'central … success story' (p. 126) of the New Deal, rubbishing an entire generation of bad scholarship along the way. Plotke's case is so compelling that it is hard to understand why otherwise intelligent people should have spent so much time so perversely, barking up the wrong trees.[17]

[15] Donald Brand, *Corporatism and the rule of law: a study of the National Recovery Act* (Ithaca, 1988).

[16] Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The rise and fall of the New Deal order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, 1989).

[17] Melvyn Dubofsky, *The state and labor in modern America* (Chapel Hill, 1994), complements Plotke's work on the Wagner Act's political origins by examining its implementation and impact, in the process wreaking the same kind of destruction among 'critical legal historians' as Plotke manages for their political 'science' comrades.

Time and again, Plotke resolves arguments critical of the New Deal Order and its successor, often termed Cold War Liberalism, in its favour. Rather than the New Deal having been a pro-business con on the American people, it is represented as a positive programme designed, in fact, by New Dealers – the left-of-centre lawyers and other academics, advisers and appointed officials, party strategists and politicians, who devised policies, argued for and implemented them, served and recreated the party's popular base. The role of grass-roots demand in stimulating and legitimizing change is not neglected, but the insiders take most of the credit; and they are their own people, not anybody's tools. What they devised was a credible, acceptable, and partly workable solution to the multiple crises of the depression. The most likely alternatives at the time to the course they charted were not better but worse: Plotke is dismissive of the Communist party, whose 'language … had no prospect of being widely accepted', and whose proposals were 'deeply unattractive' to most contemporaries, not just to the author (pp. 99–100). The non-communist left is also written off, as is the common notion among academics that the New Deal Democratic Party was once, or could have become, something like a European social democratic movement. At all times – Plotke focuses on the middle 1930s, then jumps to the early Truman era – the real argument lay between the New Deal's progressive liberalism and an older, pro-business, Southern Democratic and Republican conservatism bordering on reaction.

New Deal Democrats can be faulted – Plotke attacks, in particular, the Truman administration's record on the civil rights of communists and African-Americans, the Democrats' failure to engage with emerging 'women's issues', and their neglect of the atrophying popular base of their federal administration-centred regime. But, in an age of electoral apathy and political demobilization, with Gingriches in Congress and congress in the Oval Office, Plotke's is a reminder of a lost world of decent possibilities. Nobody interested in the history of the United States since the 1930s can afford not to read this book packed with intelligence and insight. The second volume of this major work, provisionally entitled *Democratic breakup*, which will give the decline of this political order as much attention as he has provided to its creation and endurance, is eagerly awaited.

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